

RACE

The Pedagogy of Stories

STORY AS PEDAGOGY IN ANTI-RACISM WORK

We tell and hear stories everyday. Those who parent tell stories, for example, to teach about family traditions and history and to show ethical and moral behavior and choices.

Educators read stories to engage the imaginations of youth and illustrate concepts through story. These are the more familiar and heart-warming uses of story.

Yet, stories are also used to condition and socialize us into ideologies that dehumanize BIPOC, womxn, working-class people, immigrant families and those who do not speak English as their first language. Society perpetuates racist stories about who belongs, who we should fear, who is worthy of love, concern and trust (and who is not). These stories are heavy with untrue stereotypes that we tell over and over again. We tell them so often that we come to believe these stories (and the stereotypes within) as true.

These are the unlovely uses of story.

Here, we want to talk about **story as pedagogy in anti-racism work**.

- How can we use story purposefully to help participants unlearn ideologies that perpetuate racism (and sexism, heterosexism, homophobia, ableism, xenophobia and classism)?
- What is storytelling for racial justice, storytelling for the purpose of raising the awareness and consciousness of young people and adult learners who come anew to discussions on racism and anti-racism?
- How can storytelling be helpful in the pursuit of the kind of justice that Prentis Hemphill describes as “synonymous” with “love”?

The kind of change we are after is cellular as well as institutional, is personal and intimate, is collective as well as cultural. We are making love synonymous with justice.

-Prentis Hemphill

WHY STORY AS PEDAGOGY IN ANTI-RACISM WORK



STORIES SERVE A HEALING PURPOSE

When we tell our stories, we are given the time and space to unearth the ways that race and racism have moved invisibly and unchecked in our lives, and bring to light issues that we've been taught to bury deep within where they cannot be healed. Ruth King writes, "**Storytelling is a healing art form....** Stories that are both tender and wise keep our hearts well lubricated and our ears attuned to humility and care. And it is an artful way to plant seeds that help us wake up, remember our belonging, and serve well" (2018, p. 234).



STORIES FINE-TUNE OUR EMPATHIC ABILITIES

Storytelling helps us to **develop empathy for ourselves and others** for the harm we experience due to racism. Rhonda Magee writes, "To deepen understanding of these structures [of racism] and develop the empathy needed to care about their effects, we need new ways of teaching and learning about race in community with others. We need to practice telling our own Race Stories.... We tell them to practice admitting what is already in the room, and through this, to explore taking responsibility for choosing new stories and thereby further the process of setting one another free." (2019, p. 124).



STORIES TEACH

We know that stories can teach, but we can also use stories to **unteach**. Specifically, unteach those deeply-held beliefs rooted in racist ideologies into which we have been socialized:

Research shows that deep personal sharing [such as through shared storytelling] among dialogue participants is an important factor for breaking down unconscious and conscious bias, stereotypes, entrenched prejudice and discrimination (Yeakley, 2011). As scholars have pointed out, using storytelling and activating empathy often does more to surface and counter implicit bias and to challenge previously held beliefs than cognitive learning (Broockman & KALLA, 2016; Maxwell, Nagda, & Thompson, 2011; WNYC, 2018). Facilitators who use activities that involve feeling and doing, not just thinking, are often more productive in moving participants to deeper levels of understanding identity, power and privilege.

Kaplowitz et al, 2019, p. 54

SETTING UP A SPACE TO USE STORYTELLING FOR RACIAL LITERACY & JUSTICE

PART 1 --- PURPOSE, PROMPTS AND PRE-THINKING

PROVIDE PURPOSE

We are not used to talking about race, and definitely not used to reflecting on and sharing our race stories. In fact, many have been actively discouraged from these discussions, told that to talk about race is, in itself, an act of racism. So, we recommend **providing in advance the purpose** for asking participants to write, share and reflect on their race stories. Make clear its pedagogical purposes, and communicate its value in the participants' journeys.

PROVIDE PROMPTS

Provide prompts for the storytellers to **give focus to their stories**. This focus also means that listeners and tellers **create a space of shared experience**, where they can connect with others across common prompts. [James Loewen](#) provides example autobiographical prompts as does Louise Derman-Sparks and Patricia Ramsey, in their book *What if all the kids are white? Anti-bias multicultural education with young children and families.*

PROVIDE PRE-THINKING

And, finally, provide time for them to pre-think their story prior to sharing it. We often ask participants to consider, while pre-thinking their story, how much they feel comfortable sharing. We encourage them to share at the level that would allow you to make easy eye contact the next day with those who heard your story.

Oversharing does not feel good for anyone.

SETTING UP A SPACE TO USE STORYTELLING FOR RACIAL LITERACY & JUSTICE

PART 2 --- PROVIDE PROTOCOLS TO SUPPORT THE SHARING OF STORIES

PROTOCOLS FOR HOW TO BE TOGETHER: We always provide **norms** for how to be together during storytelling. For example, we invoke a norm of confidentiality: "What's heard here stays here. What's learned here, leaves here." That is, a story belongs to the teller. Others may not retell someone else's story. However, what someone learns about themselves from hearing another's story can certainly be shared.

PROTOCOLS FOR HOW TO LISTEN: In everyday listening, we do **"ego listening"** where the spotlight is on ourselves. We listen with attention to the relevance of someone's story for ourselves. We compare the story we hear with our own experience and judge the storyteller's experience as harder/more challenging, or easier/more privileged than our own. In our protocol for listening, we ask that the audience put the spotlight on the storyteller by using **"mindful listening"**. Also referred to as *expansive listening*, *resonant listening* and *active listening* (there are subtle differences among these practices of listening, but they have in common a way of being present for the storyteller that centers the sharer and de-centers the listener), mindful listening is about being present for the storyteller in a way that focuses all energy and attention on the storyteller. In mindful listening, we listen for places in the story to show gratitude to the storyteller and to acknowledge their vulnerability and willingness to share.

PROTOCOLS FOR STAYING IN THE STRETCH ZONE: The body can tell us quite accurately what we need to do to be well in any given moment, if only we listen. So we ask participants to pay particular attention to what is coming up in their bodies as they tell and hear stories and to practice a number of techniques to get themselves into a space where they can make thoughtful choices about how to proceed.

PROTOCOLS FOR METACOGNITION: We ask participants questions like: What did you learn through storytelling? What did you learn from publicly telling your story? What did you learn from hearing other people's stories? What did you learn about race, racism and anti-racism from storytelling? Why is storytelling important in racial literacy work?

THIS POST IS OFFERED BY:

Rise for Racial Justice in Education

RISE is an organization that provides anti-racism training to K16 educators and parents.

To find out more about what they offer, please go to riseforracialjustice.org.